Sissinghurst Castle Garden

THE NATIONAL TRUST

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Kent

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1983

Sissinghurst Castle lies in the Weald of Kent, one mile east of Sissinghurst village on A262, 2½ miles north-east of Cranbrook, and thirteen miles south of Maidstone.

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Cover: Sissinghurst in 1760, from an engraving by James Peak.

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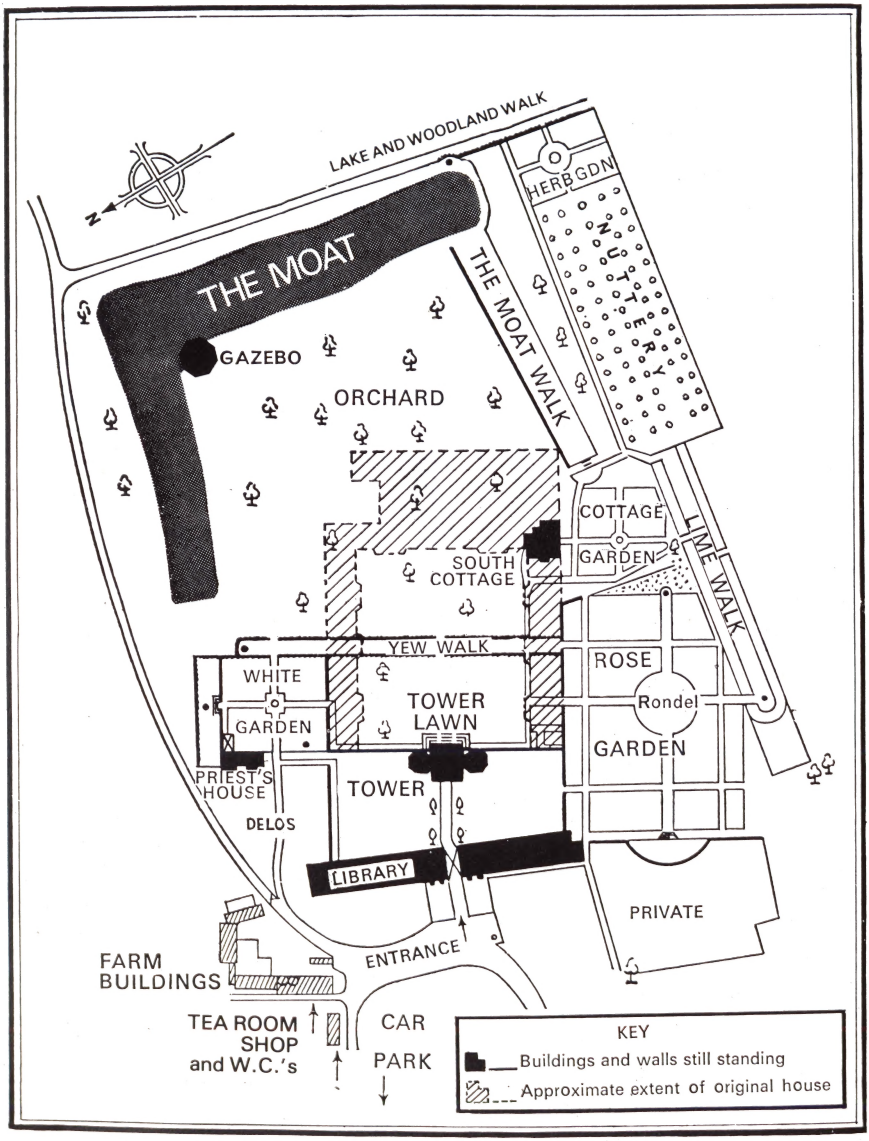
Plan of House and Garden



Sissinghurst Castle

For a detailed description of the house and garden, turn to p. 15

The story of Sissinghurst can be summed up in a sentence: a great Tudor and Elizabethan mansion slowly fell to pieces because there was nobody left to care for it, until in 1930 it came into the hands of two gifted people, V. Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson, who repaired the surviving buildings and created among them one of the loveliest gardens in England.

The name 'Castle' is misleading if it brings visitors in search of fortifications. Sissinghurst was built at a time when less bellicose and more comfortable houses were replacing the fortified manors of the Middle Ages, and it remains today gentle and unaustere. It acquired its title Castle only in the mid eighteenth century, and then because it became a prison to keep men in, not a fortress to keep them out. The French prisoners-of-war who were detained here between 1756 and 1763 called it *le château*, thinking perhaps of the name commonly given to the manor-houses of their own country, and it has clung to Sissinghurst ever since.

The site was occupied as early as the twelfth century. It was then called Saxingherste, and the family who first owned it were named after the place, de Saxingherste. They built a manor on the spot where the orchard now lies, and surrounded it by a moat, of which three arms can still be seen, two of them filled with water and the third converted into a grass walk. It was a large house, capable of offering hospitality to Edward I and his retinue for four nights in 1305, but nothing of it survives except the moat, since its new owners, a family called de Berham, sold it in about 1490 to another local family, the Bakers of Cranbrook, and the Bakers pulled it down. In its place, on the higher ground slightly to the west, they built a great new house of which the long entrance range survives, and in the centre of it Sir John Baker inserted the present gate-house and arch in about 1535. Beyond, where the tower now stands, there must have been a large fifteenth-century hall, a chapel and other buildings, which have now disappeared.[1]

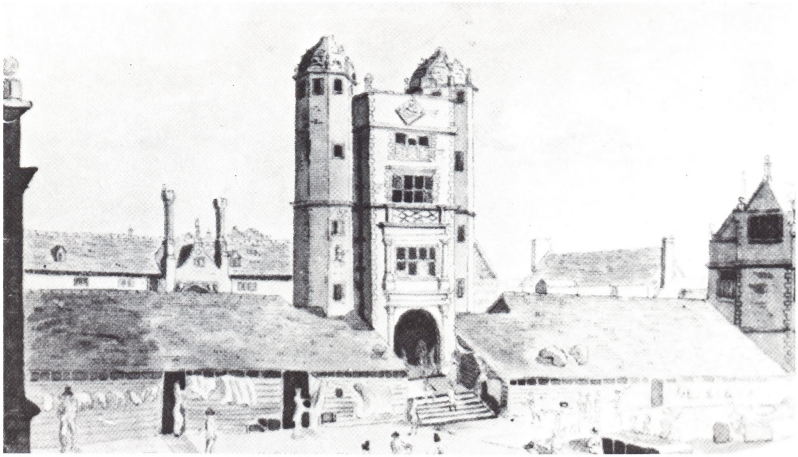
[1] For a fuller discussion of the architectural history of Sissinghurst, see *Sissinghurst Castle: An Illustrated History*. By Nigel Nicolson.

This Sir John Baker was the most eminent man of his family, becoming in turn Attorney General, Chancellor of the Exchequer and Speaker of the House of Commons in the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary. His reputation has suffered from largely mythical stories which began to circulate long after his death, attributing to him not only inhuman persecution of the Protestants, but rape, murder and pillage, which earned him the posthumous title 'Bloody Baker'. In truth, he was simply a man of his age, concerned with his own survival and advancement under unpredictable monarchs and in competition with the ruthless ambitions of other men. He died in 1558 at the age of seventy, leaving behind him a vast fortune acquired by more or less reputable means.

It is now thought to have been his son, Sir Richard Baker, who in about 1560–70 demolished all except the entrance range of his father's house, and built the tower and Elizabethan mansion beyond it. Its appearance from the tower steps, when it stood intact, is shown in the engraving (below) made in about 1787 by Richard Godfrey. Clearly it was a house of great magnificence, and it is not surprising that Queen Elizabeth I should have chosen it for a three-day visit during her Progress through the Weald in 1573, only a few years after it was completed.

Sissinghurst remained in the Baker family for another hundred years. One of them built a chapel in the orchard and installed

The courtyard of the Elizabethan house seen from the steps of the tower. An engraving made in about 1787 by Richard Godfrey. All but the far right-hand corner, which now survives as the South Cottage, was demolished in about 1800, when the building had fallen into ruins



A drawing made in 1760, when French prisoners-of-war were in occupation of the Castle. Apart from the turret-tops, the tower has remained unaltered, but the building on the right was part of the demolished courtyard

his private chaplain in the detached sixteenth-century building still known as the Priest's House. But this same Baker, another Sir John, lost much of the family fortune by backing the losing side in the Civil War, and his son, dying in 1661, left four daughters but no sons. This was the beginning of Sissinghurst's decline. Two of the daughters died childless, and the husbands of the other two possessed estates of their own in other parts of the country. Nobody looked to Sissinghurst any more as his main responsibility or family home, and when Horace Walpole visited it in 1752, he found 'a park in ruins and a house in ten times greater ruins'. It was in these circumstances that Sissinghurst was leased to the Government as a prison for French seamen captured during the Seven Years' War.

Several pictures of the house survive from this period. One of them (above) shows the prisoners strolling round the courtyard and hanging out their laundry at the foot of the tower, watched by patrolling sentries. The outer doors and windows were bricked up to prevent the prisoners escaping, for as many as 3,000 of them were incarcerated here, and the guards were in comparison few in number. One of the English officers in charge was no less a person than Edward Gibbon, the future historian of the Roman Empire, then serving in the Hampshire Militia. He recorded in his Journal for December 12th 1760:

'I relieved the guard at Sissinghurst, a strong large old seat. The duty was hard, the dirt most oppressive, through which the men from their wretched barracks had two miles to march every day, and their officers three from a country town [Cranbrook] almost as miserable. The inconceivable dirtiness of the season, the country and the spot aggravated the hardships of a duty far too heavy for our numbers.'

For the prisoners conditions were even worse. They were crowded together in every part of the mouldering house. Inscriptions above some of the inner doors show that as many as eighteen men were lodged in rooms 18 by 16 ft. Their complaints about the filth, the cold, the disease, short rations and the brutality of their guards belie the calm impression of the scene here illustrated. To be sent to Sissinghurst was considered the worse fate that could befall a French prisoner in English hands. Prisoners were murdered by their guards, and guards by their prisoners, and several attempts at escape were made, almost all of them unsuccessful. In retaliation, the Frenchmen broke up the house. They burned for firewood the furniture of the chapel, the panelling, and even the doors and window-frames. When the war came to an end in 1763, the great mansion was left a wreck. It was valued at a mere £300.

Nothing could be done about it. In about 1800, Sir Horace Mann of Linton, whose uncle had bought the estate in 1764, pulled down the larger part of the house for the sake of its building materials, sparing only the tower, the front range, the Priest's House and one end of the south wing of the courtyard, which now stands isolated in the garden as the South Cottage. These buildings suffered the extreme indignity of conversion into the Parish Workhouse, and such it remained for sixty years, from 1796 to 1855. For a further fifty years the Mann-Cornwallis family leased the surrounding land to a farmer who lived in the Victorian house on the right of the drive, while the more humble of his labourers inhabited the Castle ruins. In 1903 the Cornwallises sold the estate, and it passed through the hands of various farmers until in 1930 it at last found a rescuer.

In that year, V. Sackville-West, poet, novelist, biographer and gardener, a direct descendant of the first Sir John Baker's daughter Cecily, who married Thomas Sackville, 1st Earl of

The Orchard

The Lime Walk in Spring

Dorset, was searching the Weald of Kent for a place where she could make a new garden, when her own house, Long Barn near Sevenoaks, was threatened by commuters' development. She first saw Sissinghurst on 4 April 1930, following a chance suggestion from an estate-agent, and immediately realized its possibilities. Underlying her later description of that first visit is an indication of the courage with which she faced the colossal task of restoration:

'Some high Tudor walls of pink brick remained as the anatomy of the garden-to-be, and two stretches of a much older moat provided a black mirror of quiet water in the distance. The soil had been cultivated for at least four hundred years, and it was not a bad soil to start with, being in the main what is geologically called Tunbridge Wells sand: a somewhat misleading name, since it was not sandy, but consisted of a top-spit of decently friable loam with a clay bottom, if we were so unwise as to turn up the sub-soil two spits deep.

'There were the advantages, and I would not denigrate them. But in self-justification I must also draw attention to the disadvantages. The major nuisance was the truly appalling mess of rubbish to be cleared away before we could undertake any planting at all. The place had been on the market for several years since the death of the last owner, a farmer, who naturally had not regarded the surroundings of the old castle as a garden, but merely as a convenient dump for his rusty iron, or as allotments for his labourers, or as runs for their chickens. The amount of old bedsteads, old plough-shares, old cabbage stalks, old broken-down earth closets, old matted wire, and mountains of sardine tins, all muddled up in a tangle of bindweed, nettles and ground elder, should have sufficed to daunt anybody.

'Yet the place, when I first saw it on a spring day in 1930, caught instantly at my heart and my imagination. I fell in love; love at first sight. I saw what might be made of it. It was Sleeping Beauty's Garden: but a castle running away into sordidness and squalor; a garden crying out for rescue. It was easy to foresee, even then, what a struggle we should have to redeem it.'[1]

The aerial view (on page 12), taken in 1932, well illustrates the transition between the old and the new. The archway in the centre of the entrance building had been opened up for the first

[1] *Journal of the Horticultural Society*, Vol. LXXVIII, November 1953.

Left: A corner of the Rose Garden

time since the departure of the prisoners, and although the wing to the right of it was inhabited, that to the left was still a stable with a granary above, as it had been in Horace Walpole's day. The forecourt was a shambles. The first inner courtyard was open at its north end to rows of cabbages, and the present rose garden was an allotment. The tower-lawn was beginning to assume its present appearance, but the yew hedges on the far side of it had only just been planted as little trees 18 inches high. Beyond, to the right, can be seen the lake, which was one of the first works to be completed by damming a small stream, but the two avenues of poplars, now so striking a feature of the approaches to house and lake, had not yet been planted.

The design of the garden, which repays as much study as its planting, was the achievement of Sir Harold Nicolson, to whom V. Sackville-West had been married since 1913. Here again, her own description of their collaboration is better than any paraphrase:

'The walls were not all at right-angles to one another: the courtyard was not rectangular but coffin-shaped; the tower was not opposite the main entrance; the moat-walk, with its supporting wall, ran away on so queer a bias that the statue we placed on the bank behind the moat stood opposite both to the tower and to the seat at the upper end of the moat-walk. All this was disconcerting, and there were also minor crookednesses which had somehow to be camouflaged. I do not think that you would notice them from ground-level now; though if you ascended the tower and looked down, you might still give a sympathetic thought to the worried designer, with his immense sheets of ruled paper and his measuring tapes and his indiarubbers, pushing his fingers through his rumpled hair, trying to get the puzzle worked out.

'I could never have done it myself. Fortunately I had acquired, through marriage, the ideal collaborator. Harold Nicolson should have been a garden-architect in another life. He has a natural taste for symmetry, and an ingenuity for forcing focal points or long-distance views where everything seemed against him, a capacity I totally lacked. After weeks of paper struggle he would come home to discover that I had stuck some tree or shrub bang in the middle of his projected path or gateway.

'We did, however, agree entirely on what was to be the main principle of the garden: a combination of long axial walks, running north and south, east and west, usually with terminal points such as a statue or an archway or a pair of sentinel poplars, and the more intimate surprise of small

geometrical gardens opening off them, rather as the rooms of an enormous house would open off the arterial corridors. There should be the strictest formality of design, with the maximum informality in planting. This is what we aimed at, and is, I hope, what we have achieved.'[1]

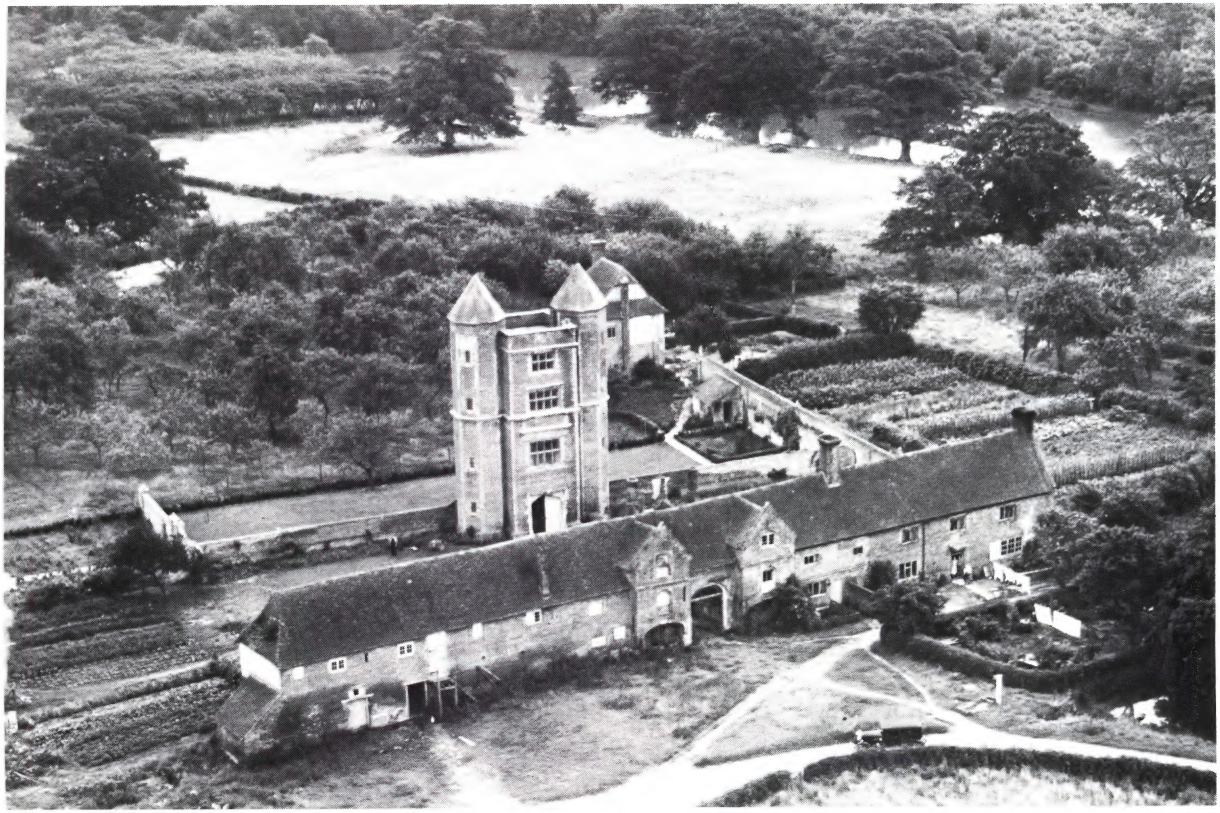
'The strictest formality of design, with the maximum informality in planting'; or, as Miss Sackville-West expressed it elsewhere, 'Profusion, even extravagance and exuberance, within the confines of the utmost linear severity'.[2] That is the key to the garden at Sissinghurst. Like their own marriage, the garden represents the perfect fusion between the classical and romantic temperaments.

If V. Sackville-West 'could never have done it herself', neither could Harold Nicolson have clothed his design with plants and flowers quite as effectively as she did. She started with two basic ideas, and later added a third. First, 'it was a romantic place, and it must be romantically treated. Very English, very Kentish, yet it had something foreign about it; a Norman manor-house perhaps; a faint echo of something more southern. That was why figs and vines and roses looked so right, so inevitable. I planted them recklessly.' Secondly, 'the garden with all its separate rooms and sub-sections must be a garden of seasonal features throughout the year: we could have a spring garden, March to mid-May, and an early summer garden, May–July; and a late-summer garden, July–August; and an autumn garden, September–October.' After the war she began to experiment with a third idea, that some of the separate gardens should have a predominant colour – orange and yellow for the cottage garden; white for the garden by the Priest's House; dark blue and purple along the north side of the front courtyard.

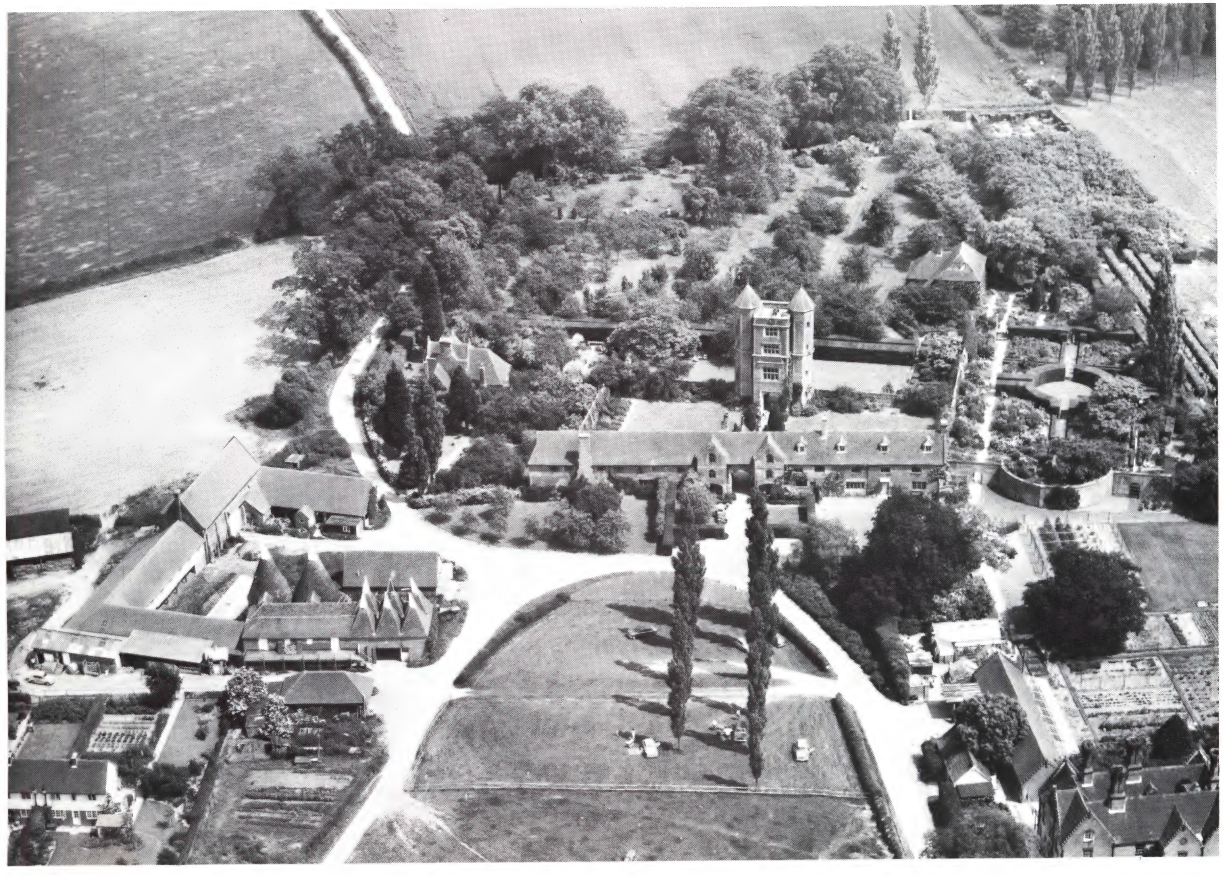
Before coming to a more detailed description of the house and garden, a word should be said about the restoration of the buildings. The Nicolsons added little, but saved much. In 1930 there was no water except from the wells, no light except from oil-lamps; there was scarcely a pane of unbroken glass in the windows, and doorways were often doorless. For the first year, before they leased Long Barn, they camped at week-ends in the

[1] *Journal of the Royal Horticultural Society, loc. cit.*
[2] *Country Life*, 11 September 1942.

The Castle seen from the air in 1932



The Castle seen from the air in the 1970s



first-floor room of the tower, while the South Cottage was being made habitable for themselves and the Priest's House for their young sons. To the first they added a bedroom with a garden-room beneath; to the second a bathroom. Next they converted the stables in the north wing into a library. The roof of this wing had to be completely renovated, and two Victorian cottages, which had attached themselves to the south wing on the courtyard side, were removed. Apart from smaller repairs, the house was otherwise left untouched.

It made an odd house to live in. Each person inhabited a separate building, and to sleep, eat, bath and work meant a walk, summer or winter, across the garden from one part to another. The dining-room and kitchen were in the Priest's House, V. Sackville-West's sitting-room in the tower, Harold Nicolson wrote in the South Cottage, and the children, as they grew older, lived in the long building in front. There was no guest room, which struck people as strange for a Castle, but Sissinghurst was never luxurious, nor even very comfortable. It was a place to visit on a summer's day, and when the garden was opened to the public after the war, many thousands took the opportunity to do so.

V. Sackville-West died on 2 June 1962 on the first floor of the Priest's House, where she had been moved for greater convenience from her own bedroom in the South Cottage. She left the Castle and garden to her younger son, Nigel Nicolson, apart from the South Cottage, which was bequeathed to Harold Nicolson for his lifetime. There he died at the age of 81 on 1 May 1968. In the previous year Sissinghurst passed into the ownership of the National Trust, together with 270 acres of the surrounding farm.

Nigel Nicolson lives in the south wing of the front range of buildings. The South Cottage and Priest's House are let to tenants of the National Trust.

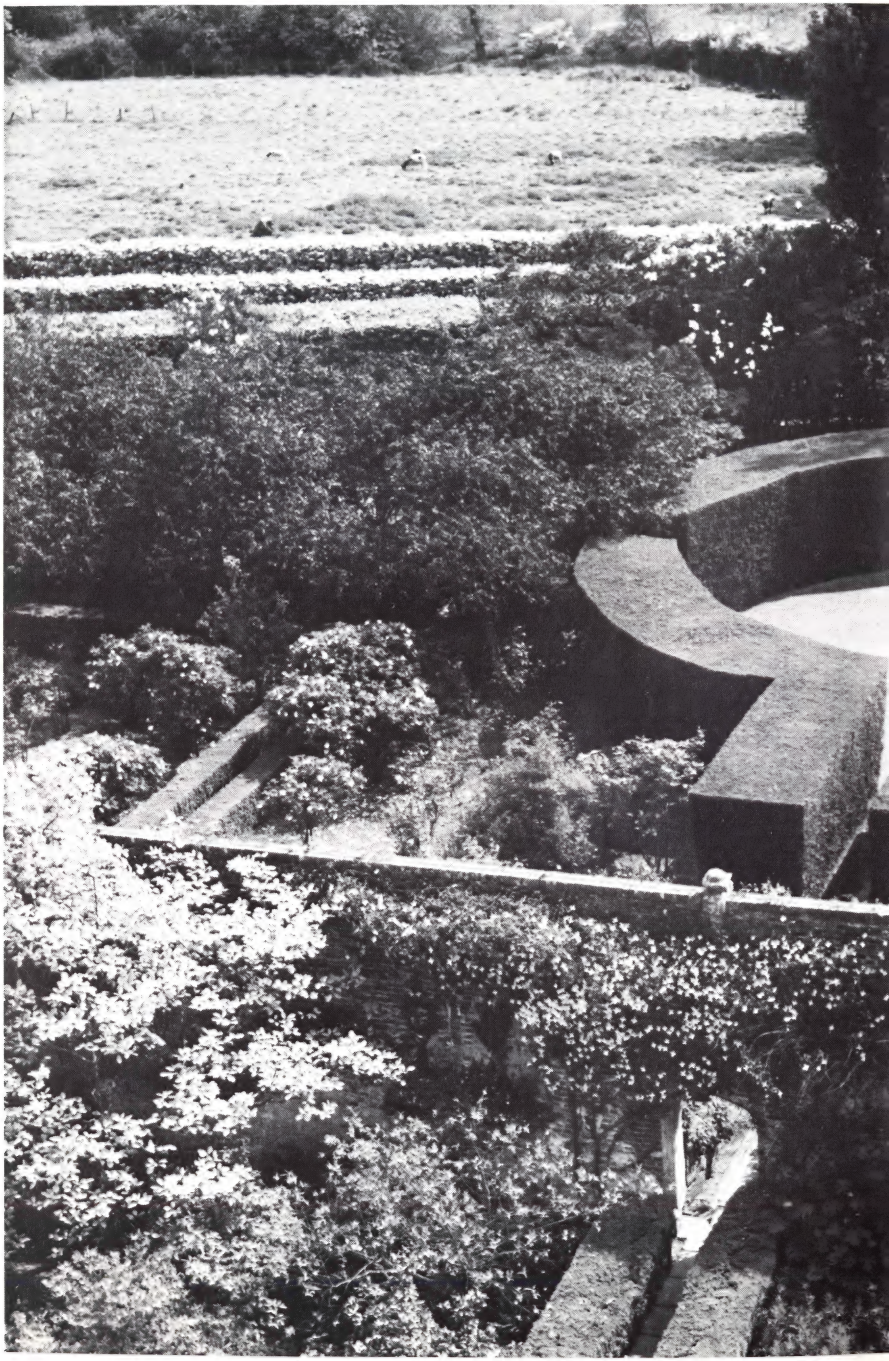
The House and Garden

The Entrance

The long range of Tudor buildings directly opposite the car park was built in about 1490, and the great central arch and gateway were inserted by Sir John Baker about forty years later. A modern restoration of his arms appears on the right-hand shield above the arch, matched on the other side by the arms of the Sackvilles. The four urns standing in the forecourt came originally from Bagatelle, the famous rose garden near Paris. Two others stand on the steps of the tower.

The Tower-courtyard

From the entrance, a broad path of old London paving-stones, flanked by four great Irish yews, leads to the Elizabethan tower of three storeys, built about 1560–70. During the summer the Sackville-West flag flies from its summit. The inner archway of the entrance range is wreathed by the flowers of a remarkably vigorous rose, 'Allen Chandler'. Over the centre of this arch are the arms of the Nicolson family, brought from Carnock in Stirlingshire, and above them rise three unusual Tudor chimneys which date the central part of this building to the second quarter of the sixteenth century. To the right is the north wing, containing on its ground floor the estate office and the long library. Below the windows are troughs of low-growing plants and a bench designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens. To the left of the archway is the south wing, converted in 1965 by Nigel Nicolson and now occupied by him. At the north side is the purple border, which is a mass of subdued colour at all flowering seasons of the year. This is achieved by bulbs, annual and perennial plants and shrubs, with a background of clematis and vines. A touch of scarlet is added by *Rosa moyesii*, first with its flowers and later with its glowing fruits.



The Rose Garden and the Rondel seen from the top of the Tower

The Entrance Archway from the front courtyard

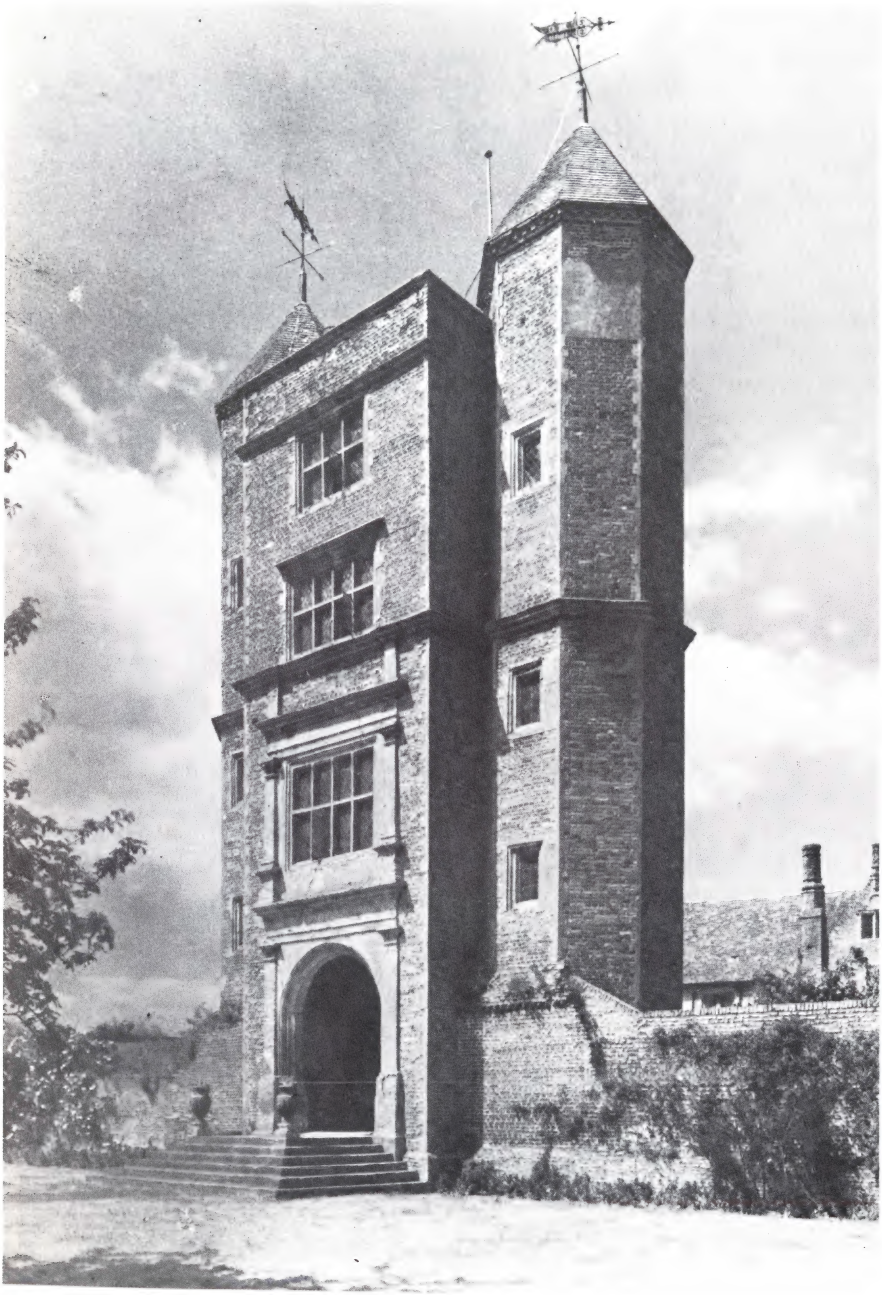
The Library

The entrance from the tower-courtyard is by the second door on the left, coming from the front archway. From the earliest times, this part of the building was the stable, and such it remained until 1930. It was dark, cold and dirty, and in transforming it into the big room which we see today, the Nicolsons were obliged to insert a huge window at the north end and to build a fireplace opposite the main door, of which the chimney-piece is formed by several original pieces of an Elizabethan fireplace found buried in the garden. The chimney-stack behind was copied from an Elizabethan original in Sissinghurst village. Along two walls of the room over 4,000 books are stacked from floor to ceiling. The portrait of the bearded Sir Thomas Sackville, 1st Earl of Dorset, who married Cecily, daughter of Sir John Baker, is hung at the far end of the room above the dais, and that of Vita Sackville-West, painted by de Laszlo at Knole in 1910 when she was 18, above the fireplace. The room is furnished with Italian, French and early English furniture. A collection of medieval Persian pottery is in the Chinese cabinet to the left of the fireplace.

The Tower

The tower, with its two octagonal turrets, was completed by Sir Richard Baker shortly before Queen Elizabeth I spent three nights at Sissinghurst in August 1573. The left-hand turret contains a spiral staircase of 78 steps mounting to the leads, while the right-hand turret forms small octagonal rooms on each of the floors above. Beside the door to the staircase is a tablet to the memory of V. Sackville-West, designed by Reynolds Stone.

On the first floor is the sitting-room which V. Sackville-West occupied from 1931 until her death in 1962. From its windows, as she would say, she 'could see without being seen', when not wishing to be disturbed; and she would work here, often late at night, on her many books, of which copies, together with those of Harold Nicolson, are on the shelves beneath the window on the left-hand side. At the back of her writing-table are three portraits of the Brontë sisters, Harold Nicolson and Virginia Woolf, and some of the source-books for her last biography, *Daughter of France*, published in 1960. The walls are lined with books reflecting her special interests: English literature on the



The Elizabethan Tower, photographed in 1942 before the walls on each side had been fully covered by roses and other plants

right of the door, history and travel in the far left-hand corner, and gardening books on the right of the turret alcove. The couch on which she so often rested is beneath the west window. The remainder of the room is full of reminders of her many journeys abroad, Sackville miniatures, and pictures and manuscripts by her friends.

On the second floor of the tower is a small museum illustrating the history of the house and the making of the garden. Its central exhibit is a model of the house as it was in 1573, the year of Queen Elizabeth's visit, constructed by James Macmillan Scott. Round the walls are photographs of the garden in the early 1930s, and drawings of the Castle as it may have appeared in earlier centuries. In the show-case are diaries, letters and manuscripts by Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson, recording the gradual transformation of Sissinghurst. In the turret is the printing-press on which Virginia and Leonard Woolf printed the first edition of *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot and other early productions of the Hogarth Press.

The top floor of the tower was used as a bedroom in 1936–39, and as a guardroom for the Home Guard throughout the Second World War.

From the top of the tower a view can be obtained over the whole garden and a large part of the Kentish Weald. The points of the compass are shown overhead, beneath the weather-vanes which bear the initials and date M.C. 1839 (Mann-Cornwallis, who repaired the turret-tops at that time). To the north is the long range of the North Downs, seen across the eight-mile-wide valley of the Weald. Maidstone and Canterbury are just beyond the ridge, to the north and north-east respectively. Nearer at hand are the church-towers of Frittenden (north) and Biddenden (east). To the south the view is limited by the wooded ridge which runs above the lake. Westwards, beyond the entrance range and the farm-house (built 1855), lies a large part of the Sissinghurst Castle farm.

In the turret opposite the stair-head is the bell which strikes each hour.

V. Sackville-West at her writing table in the Tower

The Rose Garden

The rose garden depends chiefly for its effect upon old-fashioned roses, supplemented by other flowering shrubs in the long border under the wall. 'In former days,' wrote V. Sackville-West, 'this would almost automatically have become a herbaceous border, very garish in July and August, but to my mind, the shrubs available today (many of which were of course unknown to our grandparents) are more interesting as well as more saving of labour.' Dominating the border between the gate and the grille-window is *Rosa californica plena*, with its arching sprays of delicately scented flowers. At its feet is the autumn-flowering *Caryopteris* × *clandonensis*. Nearby is a group of striped gallica *Rosa mundi*, and the Cape Lily, *Crinum powellii*. Other shrubs include *Ceanothus impressus*, and, in late summer, lace-cap hydrangeas (*H. villosa*) provide a background for *Acanthus spinosus*, the inspiration for Corinthian capitals. There are also many irises along the path; paeonies in a shady bed; in June a big group of *Eremurus robustus* against a background of yew; figs, clematis and roses on the wall; some yuccas; and as many pansies as can be crammed in.

In the centre of the garden, formed by circular yew hedges, is the Rondel, a name given by Kentish people to the round floor in oast-houses, and borrowed by them to describe this circular patch of turf. Among the rose-beds to the right is a bed planted with delphiniums, foxgloves and day-lilies. To the left, the Hybrid Perpetual rose 'Ulrich Brunner' is trained over hazel benders.

Lime Walk

Leaving the Rondel by the south side, one comes to the lime walk, or spring garden. Although at other times of the year it is apt to be a little bare, in March, April and early May the two borders along each side of a flagged path, shaded by pleached limes and punctuated by garden pots from Tuscany, form a picture which reminded V. Sackville-West of the foreground to Botticelli's *Primavera*. This garden was Harold Nicolson's particular care, and he chose for it all the flowers that open the garden's annual cycle. Tall pots overflow with clematis. There are sheets of the blue *Anemone apennina*, forget-me-nots, scillas

and grape-hyacinths, mixed with daffodils, erythroniums, fritillaries and the vivid scarlet of *Anemone fulgens*.

The Cottage Garden

This garden is approached through an opening in the hedge on the left, towards the far end of the Lime Walk. Facing this gap is the South Cottage, once the end of the long south wing of the Elizabethan house. Harold Nicolson's sitting-room lay to the left and right of the front door, and many of his books were typed at the desk that lies just behind the left-hand window. The cottage is now let to a tenant of the National Trust. The garden is planted with a controlled untidiness. The colours are warm and welcoming, and the paths are paved with a mixture of paving-stones and old bricks, with a large copper in the centre, filled with *Mimulus* and guarded by four Irish yews. An abundant white rose, 'Mme Alfred Carrière' covers the front wall of the cottage to the eaves, and on the left-hand corner the early yellow climbing rose 'Lawrence Johnston' clothes the wall above bronze and yellow-tree paeonies. Tulips and columbines, rock-roses, iris and evening primrose as well as tiger-lilies and dahlias fill this garden with colour throughout the year.

The Moat Walk and Nuttery

From the cottage garden the visitor can either walk down the brick steps on the left to the grass walk flanked on one side by a bank of azaleas and on the other by the old moat wall, or take the path through the nuttery. Both the wall and the little grove of nuts were there long before the Nicolsons came, but both were hidden by a dense growth of brambles and the wall was only revealed when a pick struck against it. Over the wall hang white wistaria and the Japanese vine *Vitis pulchra*, which in autumn contrasts with the blue daisies of *Aster frikartii* 'Mönch' in the border below.

Right: The White Garden with *Rosa longicuspis*

Azaleas bordering the Moat Walk

The Herb Garden

The Herb Garden

At the far end of the Nuttery, enclosed by formal yew hedges, is the little garden where grow many unusual herbs like orris root, clary and woad, and the paths, and even a garden seat, are covered with aromatic plants. Just outside the herb garden, on the edge of the moat, is a small lawn composed entirely of creeping thyme, with the dark water of the moat beyond.

The Moat and the Orchard

A grass walk runs along the near edge of the moat, and at intervals small oaks and flowering trees have been planted along the top of the wall and within the orchard. This was the site of the original mediaeval manor-house, which was demolished nearly 500 years ago. At the north-east corner, at the angle of the moats, an octagonal summer-house or gazebo was built in 1969 and dedicated to the memory of Harold Nicolson. The windows on the moat-side overlook a twenty-mile view across the Weald towards Canterbury. The gazebo is used in summer as a writing-room. It was designed by Francis Pym, ARIBA, and the memorial tablet, in lead, is by John Skelton. Round the foot of the gazebo grows *Rosa gallica* 'Sissinghurst Castle', a variety of great antiquity and so-named when it was rediscovered here in 1930.

The centre of the orchard is filled with old apple-trees on which Miss Sackville-West grew climbing roses, and in spring thousands of daffodils and narcissi carpet the grass. Near the dove-cot is a curious memorial composed of a granite base surmounted by an old Greek altar from Delos. This was sent back in the early nineteenth century by a Nicolson ancestor, and set up at Shanganagh Castle in Ireland to commemorate the passage of the Reform Bill in 1832, as recorded on its base. Six years later, Sir George Cockburn was disillusioned, and on the reverse side added the inscription: 'July 1838. Alas to this Date a Hum Bug.' The memorial was brought to Sissinghurst from Ireland in 1936.

The Tower Lawn

The lawn, and the upper part of the orchard, occupy the site of the courtyard of the Elizabethan house. 'Albertine' roses clothe the brick walls on either side of the tower. On the south side, by

The Cottage Garden and the South Cottage in June

The Gazebo erected in 1969 by Nigel and the late Ben Nicolson in memory of their father

the entrance to the rose garden, is a bed of fine magnolias, and meconopsis and alstroemerias fill a small sunken garden which was once a cellar of the old house. The archway through the wall is known as Bishop's Gate from the plaque of three Oriental bishops let into the brickwork beside it. To the left of this arch is a gritty bed filled with the exotic flowers of *Tigridia pavonia*, *Lapeyrousia cruenta* and gladioli growing through a groundwork of other plants. On the far side of the gate is the White Garden.

The White Garden

This has been described as 'the most beautiful garden at Sissinghurst, and indeed of all England'. It lies at the foot of the Priest's House, and is divided by neat low hedges of box. All the flowers in this garden are white or grey. Lacy white festoons of strong-growing roses arch over the centre. Later in the year, generous plantings of *Lilium regale* come up through grey artemisia and silvery *Cineraria maritima*. Still later, the great metallic-looking onopordons grow up, and clouds of gypsophila throw a veil round the pencils of a white *Veronica virginica alba*, and a few belated white delphiniums and white eremuri persist. Under the silver willow-leaved pear (*Pyrus salicifolia pendula*) is a lead statue of a virgin by the Yugoslav sculptor, Rosandic, cast from the walnut original in the library; and on the far side an archway overlooks the rich farmlands of the Weald.

Delos

From the White Garden a path leads past the entrance of the Priest's House to the garden known to the Nicolsons as Delos, after the Greek island which originally inspired it. It is planted informally, with no set colour-scheme, and variations in flower and foliage maintain its interest throughout the season. There is a fine strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo*) underplanted with cyclamen, several magnolias, and a good specimen of *Quercus coccifera*, the Kermes oak. A winding path leads past the old well to a wooden door in the wall, and so back to the entrance courtyard.

N.N.

The Tower from the Cottage Garden

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